



55th EDITION

Patterns

Preface

What is *Patterns*?

Patterns magazine is St. Clair County Community College's literary and arts publication. Published annually since 1959, *Patterns* showcases the best writing and visual artwork produced by SC4 students each year. While organization and oversight of the publication has always been handled by SC4 faculty and staff, over the years we have increasingly involved students in every aspect of the publication; from producing its content, to editing, to the creative layout and design work, our students have taken on a major role in creating each issue of the magazine.

***Patterns* Writing and Art Competition**

Since its inception, *Patterns* has featured student writing and artworks selected as the result of a competition conducted in the fall of the year. Panels of volunteer judges in the faculty of English and arts determine which works will be published. Beginning with the initiation of the *Patterns* Visiting Artists Forum (see below), professional writers from outside the college have selected the top prize winners in poetry, fiction and essay writing.

Visiting Artists Forum

In 2000, SC4 Professor Jim Frank applied for a grant to fund the first *Patterns* Visiting Artists Forum, a program that invited professional writers of national and international repute to act as judges for the *Patterns* competition and to come to our campus in April to conduct writing workshops; meet with students, faculty, staff and community members; and give public readings of their own work. Frank's initiative has continued, and, for more than a decade, we have been privileged to host poets, novelists, playwrights and essayists of the highest caliber – including winners of such honors as the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award.

This year, authors Mike Magnuson and Bruce Taylor are serving as visiting authors for the forum. Biographical notes introducing these two authors are published later in this volume. We express our gratitude to the Michigan Council for Arts and Cultural Affairs Minigrant program, administered by the Anton Art Center in Mount Clemens, for making this year's forum possible.

55th edition of *Patterns*

The contents of any given issue of *Patterns* reflects the fluctuations in the work submitted by our students in the annual competition. This year, because of an unusually low set of submissions for the essay category, the editors of *Patterns* elected to forego the inclusion of essays. With the hopes of seeing a rebound in essay submissions next year, we wish to remind our readers that we are happy to consider submissions of both creative nonfiction (the "personal essay") and regular academic essays. If you or someone you know has produced outstanding work for one of his or her classes, we hope to see them in the mix next December.

Visiting Authors

Mike Magnuson

Mike Magnuson is the author of two novels, *The Right Man for the Job* (HarperCollins) and *The Fire Gospels* (HarperCollins), and three books of nonfiction, *Lummox: The Evolution of a Man* (HarperCollins), *Heft on Wheels: A Field Guide to Doing a 180* (Crown) and *Bike Tribes: A Field Guide to North American Cyclists* (Rodale).

His short fiction and nonfiction have appeared in *Esquire*, *Gentleman's Quarterly*, *The Massachusetts Review*, *Men's Health*, *Backpacker* and other publications, and he is a longtime contributing writer with *Bicycling* magazine. His piece "Whatever Happened to Greg LeMond" – originally published in *Bicycling* – has been reprinted in *Best American Sports Writing 2010* and in *The Best of Bicycling Magazine*.

He lives in Appleton, Wis., where he is finishing a long novel about working people in Wisconsin's Fox Valley region. In his spare time, Magnuson is an avid cyclocross racer and avid cook, which is why he's never skinny enough to be any good at cyclocross racing.

Magnuson also teaches prose writing in Pacific University's Low Residency MFA Program in Forest Grove, Ore.

Bruce Taylor

Bruce Taylor, professor emeritus from the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, has taught creative writing and literature for 40 years and is the author of eight collections of poetry, including *Pity The World* and the forthcoming *The Longest You've Lived Anywhere: Poems New and Selected 2013*. He is editor of eight anthologies, including *Wisconsin Poetry* and, with Patti See, *Higher Learning: Reading and Writing About College* (3rd edition, 2011).

His poetry and translations have appeared in such places as *Able Muse*, *The Chicago Review*, *The Columbia Review*, *The Cortland Review*, *The Nation*, *The New York Quarterly*, *Poetry*, *Rattle*, *Rosebud* and on *Writer's Almanac* as read by Garrison Keillor.

Taylor has lectured at Jinan University in Zhuhai, China, and has been a Senior Fulbright Fellow at Koreyo University, Seoul, South Korea; a member of the Literature Panel of the Wisconsin Arts Board; host of The Writer's Workshop: Wisconsin ETN; and a program scholar and consultant for the Wisconsin Humanities Council, Lila Wallace Foundation, L.E. Phillips Library, Annenberg/CPB Project and Drexel's University First Year Experience Program. He is the current Poet Laureate of Eau Claire, Wis.

He has won awards and fellowships from the Wisconsin Arts Board, Fulbright-Hayes, National Endowment for the Arts, National Endowment for the Humanities, Council of Wisconsin Writers and Bush Artist Foundation, as well as the Excellence In Scholarship award from UWEC.

He lives in Lake Hallie, Wis., with his wife, writer Patti See.

Guest Art Judge

Kirby Smith

Kirby Smith, lifetime artist and educator, has focused his study in ceramics and painting. He has exhibited his work in Michigan, Minnesota and Indiana. He has been an active educator for more than 40 years. Smith was awarded an Outstanding High School Teacher Award by the University of Detroit Mercy in 1997. In 2009, Notre Dame Preparatory named its yearly award for the outstanding graduating senior art student, The Kirby D. Smith Award.

Smith is preparing for a retrospective of his ceramic pieces, to be shown in early June at Studio 1219 in Port Huron. He is teaching ceramics at Wayne County Community College District in Detroit.

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Charles Phillips

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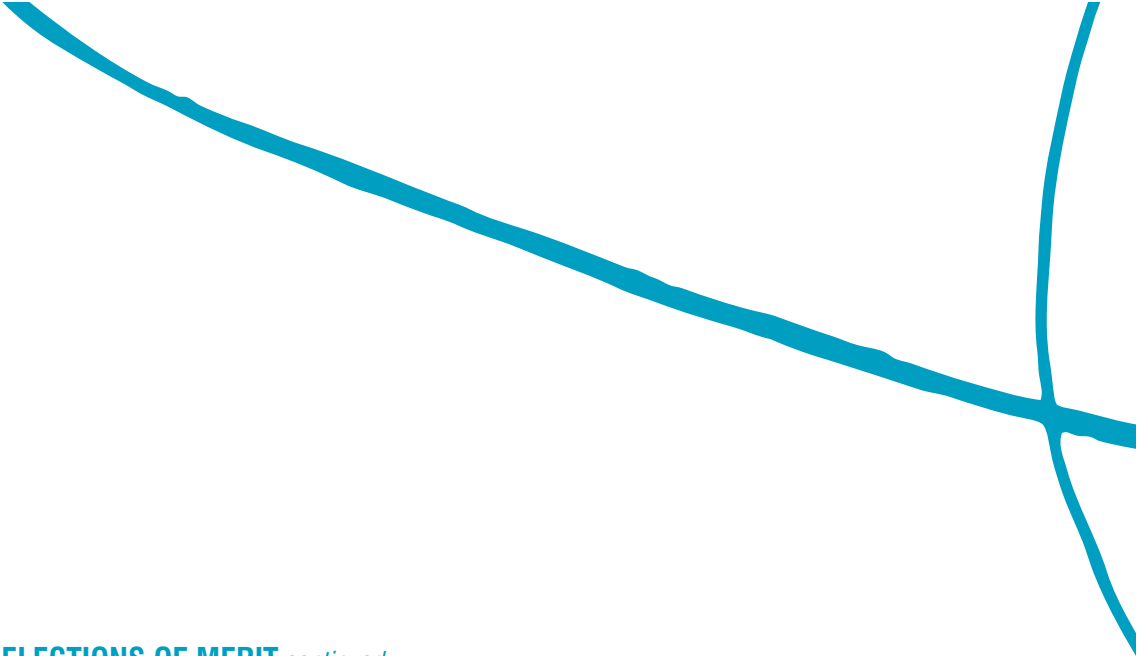
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Awarded Art

Patrick Bourke Award

Betsy Vollmar

The Patrick Bourke Award honors an art student who has made a commitment to pursue an advanced degree in one of the visual art disciplines and has been an advocate and emissary for art at St. Clair County Community College. This year's recipient is Betsy Vollmar, who has been studying all facets of art offered at SC4. Betsy has excelled in drawing, painting and ceramics. She hasn't only been immersed in the curriculum but also has a solo student show displayed in the Advising and Career Services office. This is an engaging multimedia display of Betsy's work featuring drawings, paintings and ceramic work. This is the first student show on campus to be displayed outside the Fine Arts Galleries.

Betsy uses all the basic elements of drawing in a creative and technical capacity. Her work displays the grasp of these concepts and an astute eye in the use of negative space. Her instructors describe her as very motivated, enthusiastic and eager to accept new challenges.

After graduation this year, with her associate in liberal arts degree, she plans to attend Grand Valley State University and continue her art studies. She sees herself involved in the arts for life and is open to all opportunities that present themselves. As Betsy moves on, we wish her well and we will miss that smiling face and bubbly personality.



Deep Sea

Sarah Waitkus

Pastel, charcoal and chalk

FIRST PLACE

Sarah Waitkus' pastel, charcoal and chalk drawing on colored paper is a portrayal of calm emotion. Her work allows the viewer to feel the floating movement and experience the changing light as it refracts through the water. Sarah's instructor, Holly Pennington, describes her as being receptive to new ideas in her quiet yet thoughtful way, enabling her to create works like *Deep Sea*.



The Madhatter's Tea Party

Jocelyn Graziadei

Ceramic

SECOND PLACE

Jocelyn Graziadei's use of color on her whimsical tea set brings out the child in all of us. This brightly under-glazed ceramic piece is both playful and functional. The use of saturated colors adds to the creative nature of the work. Jocelyn is a talented artist and will be attending the College for Creative Studies in Detroit to complete her bachelor of fine arts in ceramics.



Autumnal Equinox

Betsy Vollmar

Graphite

THIRD PLACE

In her study of leaves, Betsy Vollmar has demonstrated her technical facility and sensibility with the graceful movement of leaves in the fall. The dimension in her drawings creates a serenity that captures a moment in time. Betsy has experimented with various series and has developed her own individual style. We congratulate her on her perseverance and depth of feeling.





Eleanor Mathews Award

Danielle Rabine

For the past thirty years, the English faculty of SC4 has awarded the Eleanor Mathews Award for “outstanding creativity, technical skill, and individual style” to recognize student writers for overall achievement in creative writing. Traditionally the Mathews Award has been given to a deserving student who has had work published in *Patterns* in multiple genres and/or over a number of years. This year we are pleased to present this award to Danielle Rabine for her outstanding work in both fiction and poetry in this year’s issue.



A Trail Of White Lime (for Olivia)

Derek Russel

Poem

BLANCHE REDMAN AWARD

This poem astounds me. I love the way its language restrains its passion and energies. I wonder if some of these words have ever before been put together in these ways. It is beautiful in the way only truly disturbing things can be. Do I “understand” this poem? No, I don’t. Do I know what it makes me feel it’s about? Yes, as a human and a mammal, I do.

- Bruce Taylor

I happen to come to you weeping
and weeping alone.
I happen to come to you like a rejected month,
with wounded hair and a deafening sound.
I happen to enter workshops and libraries
with pulp and earth
and a tower of certain bones (trembling).

There’s a heavy water, a black smoke,
a field of poppies dying,
and at other times,
there are rooms, and great vacancies,
and abandon buildings horribly wounded
and weeping.

Certainly there must have been times,
certain periods, even years
that belonged to no one;
but you—didn’t you always belong to someone?
You who happened to come to me
like a chorus of deep circles—moist, bitten,
fiercely hungry,
shaken by the months, ravished by tunnels and smoke,
cracking like two great bells.

There’s a vigorous passing, a veinless torso
sunken in, battered by waters,
measured out in short red bursts,
in compact spaces, pale, impenetrable,
like a lost day, like an immense song;
and to surrender these horrible absences,
and to devour this soft roar,
and the darkening ground with stones,
and weather, and people forgotten...

and you,
who I owe so much.

A Basket of Tomatoes

Rebecca Casey

Poem

FIRST PLACE

It is, of course, in the shock of the last two lines of this poem the power lies. The rest of the poem is passive, serene, vegetarian. The last two lines are aggressive, threatening and all animal. If you had to choose a word to connect those two lines to the rest of the poem, what would it be? "And?" "But?" "Then?" Upon such a choice, a whole world rests.

- Bruce Taylor

They sit in the woven basket, unwashed.

As many as it can hold, and then still more.

Overflowing onto the counter it rests on.

Some with dirt stuck to them.

Some split from rain.

Some tinged with green.

A kaleidoscope of reds

Speckled with shriveled green stems.

The scent is all consuming,

The scent of summer,

Sweet and ripe and hot from the sun.

Fruit flies, like sharks,

Thirst for their ripe blood.

The Battle

Derek Russel

Poem

SECOND PLACE

This poem intrigues me; it begs to be taken as a dramatic monologue, and as such, what the speaker, even if it's the poet, is saying is probably more important than anything that actually was said. I am certainly interested in someone who says lines like these and am curious to know what in the person and/or the situation causes this reaction. And how then does the "you," even if (or maybe especially if) the "you" is the reader, react to these lines being said? And how then given that possibility might the reader reply to that speaker?

- Bruce Taylor

Tell me, my love,
have you weathered the exhaustion,
grabbed beauty from all things
distant and near,
shook it between your teeth?

Why, when I think of you,
do I think of your poppy tan feet,
suddenly surrounded,
wrapped in scarlets and lime?
that place where I stood in the dead of the day,
fiercely transparent in dampness:
muted by the earth.

My dear, if only in imagination,
stop and travel to me.
Go out, and with your precious hands,
grab for the whole earth, grab for the lone sky,
search for the steps of an immense movement,
search out to sea, out to the edge,
out to the merging of two rivers.

Crossing over multitudes,
over years and bells and grapes,
heavy legged
with the same tenacity as the wheel barrow's step,
I shall come to you.
Arriving, I shall gather certain candies and fruits,
and a straw basket
to place your steps in.
And the battle, when it comes,
in strong syllables,
in vanished kisses,
utter to me the color of your love,
and your tiny hands, like two weapons,
carefully knead them around my heart.

Gladiolus Tormentous

Brent Seth

Short Story

RICHARD COLWELL AWARD

This is a beautifully real and heartbreaking story about a beautifully unreal event: the face of God appearing in a garden flower. The narrator of this story, a humble assembly-lineworker, who works his backyard gardens “maybe half an hour every day after work,” never brags about anything, not even when his next-door neighbor discovers a miracle flower in his gladiola patch. The brief, crazy period that follows this discovery provides an amazing insight into the way people yearn to have their lives transformed by events outside of themselves. In the end, when the narrator tries to make sense of what has happened, we can’t help feeling maybe, just maybe, the ordinary lives we lead aren’t as miserable as we sometimes tell ourselves they are.

- Mike Magnuson

“The weeds haven’t been bad this year,” I remarked to myself while pulling another clover seedling from the dry mulch. The afternoon sun was scorching; the seedling seemed to wilt in hand even before I dropped it in the bucket. Still on my knees, I hobbled along the fence to look for more intruders.

“Hey, Jim. What’s up?”

I leaned back, letting my weight rest on my ankles. Peering into the blazing sun, I squinted against the glare until a shadow fell across my eyes. It was Brian—the most irritating of all my neighbors. Some people don’t understand the purpose of a fence.

“Hello,” I said, without feeling. Brian had a big mouth, drove a noisy van and carried himself with all the charm of a garbage can. He was also harmless. The last thing I wanted was to make him feel welcome, but I also forced myself to recognize that overt rudeness would just make me look like a prick.

“Working in the garden? How much time do you spend on this?”

I wiped the sweat from my brow and watched as Brian surveyed my yard. Like most of the other local men, Brian probably found my total lack of grass offensive. From my house to the back fence was all garden. Flowers, bushes and a large koi pond, but not a single blade of grass—except for the occasional stray who would find their way into my bucket before long.

“Not much, really,” I explained. “Maybe half an hour every day after work. Couple hours on the weekend.”

“How ‘bout that,” he mumbled and wandered off down a path leading deeper into the garden. I certainly had not invited him to look around, but it was better for me than chatting. With a dismissive shrug, I turned back to my work.

By the time I finished the fence-line, I had found

very few weeds, but a number of injuries sustained from the climbing roses was causing my mood to sour. The heat was getting to me as well; I could feel the redness spreading across the back of my neck. As I went to dump my bucket over the compost heap, I saw the hydrangeas had wilted, looking like wet tissue paper. I would have to run the sprinkler for a while; a good excuse to chase off my neighbor.

Brian had moved through almost the whole yard and arrived at a place just behind the pond. I was expecting a stupid-ass comment about bringing his fishing rod—people had made that joke before. Instead, he exclaimed in surprise.

“Jesus Christ!”

I jumped. He didn’t seem like the kind of man who would get excited over flowers. He was the kind of adult who still played with firecrackers...*all night long!*

“Dude,” he said, his fat face twisted into a gruesome smile. “What is this?”

“Gladiolas,” I answered, estimating his position. I couldn’t really see what he was looking at; my view partially eclipsed by a mass of tiger lilies. For some reason, perhaps the fact that Brian was still staring at something, I felt the need to elaborate.

“I’m not really happy with those. I’ve had to stake-up every one of them and they’ve only just started to bloom. I was thinking about getting rid of them altogether.”

“No!”

“I usually tear out plants that don’t look how I want them to. No big deal.”

“Have you seen this? Come look.”

Humoring Brian might be the best way to get rid of him. If he is that impressed by the flower, I might be able to give him the whole thing and be done with it. The glads were disappointing anyway.

By the time I rounded the lilies, Brian was bent over, examining the lower end of the stalk, giving me a horrible view of his big white butt crack. Gladiolas bloom from bottom and progress upwards, usually with only two or three in bloom at one time. This assortment had been inexpensive; small corms that threatened to yield no more than a dozen blooms from each stem. They started to bloom a couple of days ago. Most of them were plain white and a few were purple. The one Brian had inexplicably become enamored with was the nicest: burnt orange with a deep mottling of red spots on the lowest petal.

"Yeah," I agreed as I walked closer, trying to focus past the rolls of fat and back hair. "That one is the prettiest."

"No, no. Look!"

Brian was pointing a stubby finger at the red spots. His face was a light, almost joyous. Even the sweat running into his eyes didn't seem to bother him.

"Yes, and?"

"It's a miracle!"

"No, it's a gladiola." I tried to sound as patronizing as possible, but Brian didn't seem to notice.

"Can't you see it?" he asked, sounding rather patronizing himself.

"See what?"

"The face of Jesus! This is a miracle! A real, honest-to-God, miracle!"

At first, I didn't know how to process this development. To me, it was so ludicrous I had to replay his statement in my mind twice to believe what I had heard. Now, I was convinced I would never get him out of my yard.

"It's just a pattern of red dots," I clarified. "Look, all three blooms are the same. Personally, I don't see a face at all."

"You've gotta see it. This might be a sign!"

A sign of what? I wondered. And why the hell would it come to my back yard? Fortunately, I knew better than to ask. Even though this was the nicest of all the gladiolas, I was more than willing to part with it if that meant getting on with my life.

"Fine. Here, you can keep it."

I pulled the pruning shears from my back pocket and extended them towards the stem, bound to bamboo with a piece of green tape.

"Don't cut it," Brian cried, horrified. "Won't the rest of these bloom the same way?"

"If you put it in a sunny window, the rest of the buds will still open...well, most of them anyway."

Brian was back on his feet, waving his hands in front of himself with his back to the glads, as if to protect them from the man who had originally planted them.

"Look," I said, still hoping to diffuse the situation. "You can have the thing or not, I don't care. But I have to turn the sprinklers on for a while, or everything is going to die."

"Okay," Brian said, backing down. "Just don't cut the flower. I have to tell April about this."

I didn't bother to respond as I marched up to the garage and the sprinkler controls. Without looking back, I heard Brian exit through the gate. He was calling for his girlfriend long before he reached his own yard.

The snap and hiss of the first sprinkler heads coming to life restored to my garden the sense of peace, recently robbed. I sat in a shaded chair on the patio, listening to the flow of water and relaxed. My work was done, Brian had gone away and the garden was getting its water. Everything was good again.

Perhaps I relaxed too soon. Only a few minutes had passed since Brian's departure and already he was tromping back through the gate, dragging his girlfriend behind. I couldn't hear them over the sprinklers, but I watched as Brian pointed-out the flower to April. By her expression, I knew the story was about to be replayed.

The sprinklers in that half of the yard would start soon. If I were still sitting here when they came on, they might come to the patio, or ask me to turn off the water. I had no intention of allowing either scenario, so I went in the house. Maybe, after fixing myself a strong drink and enjoying a long, hot bath, I might be able to forget the whole thing.

The next morning began with a slight hangover. Indeed, I had forgotten the silliness of the previous afternoon, but in a way, it lingered in the shadow of my headache and bad breath. I had trouble motivating myself to dress for work. The toothpaste tasted foul and even my morning coffee seemed off.

I was running late by the time I left the house. Barely six-thirty and the day was blazing hot already. On most summer days, I would leave the house early enough to take a quick stroll through the garden, but today there just wasn't time. And as I fumbled with locking the back door, I discovered another reason to skip my morning routine.

Brian was back, with April and someone I had never seen before. The stranger was a woman in her fifties, squeezed into purple stretch pants and a T-shirt several sizes too small. I didn't need an introduction to know this was April's mother.

The three of them were behind the pond, ogling over the small group of gladiolas. Or more specifically, the gladiola they all imagined contained the face of God. There was probably a new bloom today, the same burnt orange and red specks. No

magic, just a coincidence of light and shadow and three idiots with a deranged sense of imagination.

As I dashed to my car, I wondered how long this might continue. There were at least nine buds left on the stem; the blooming period might last for a week or longer. Could I stand spending a whole week watching the most repulsive couple in America stomp through my yard every day, bringing along all their friends and family? Definitely not, and I promised myself to take care of that stinking plant the minute I got home from work.

I was distracted through my shift. My job on the assembly line was so repetitious it allowed my mind to wander, even on good days. But today, my concentration was shattered. All I could think about was what Brian might be doing right now, who might be walking around my yard, squashing my plants or disturbing my fish.

By lunchtime, I had gone the full gamut of worry through dread and finally to complacency. Brian has a job, after all. At least, I assume he has a job; I certainly never bothered to ask. But they have a house; they pay rent and each drives a car. They must go to work at some point. Hopefully, his day will bring him into contact with something shiny and Brian will have something new to fixate over.

I was sitting with my usual group in the lunchroom, but not really paying attention to the conversation. My hangover had failed to rectify itself, and now, in addition, I was getting really sleepy. No, I definitely didn't want this to go on for a week.

"Yeah, I heard on the radio this morning that some guy found a flower with Jesus' face on it! Or was it the Virgin Mary?"

My head spun around like a coiled rubber band snapping back into place. I turned to the group at the next table and demanded the speaker repeat what I hoped I had misheard.

Jeannine, one of my oldest co-workers, leaned back in her chair and repeated her tale, laughing even harder than the first time she recounted the radio story. She was one of oldest employees in the plant, looking much like anyone's ideal grandmother. But looks are deceiving; she had possibly the filthiest mouth of any woman I had ever met, and she seemed to spit pure gin when she spoke.

"Some moron called the morning show and was talking about his neighbor's flowers. He claimed one of them bares the image of Christ. Or the Virgin Mary, I can't remember. He said it was a *miracle*."

Another man at the table laughed. "I saw someone on TV once with a potato chip like that. You know how chips have those burnt spots; he found one that looked exactly like a face, but it looked more like

Manson to me."

"Who examines potato chips that close?" someone else asked. "I just eat the damn chips."

"Yeah, it shows!"

Laughter was spreading around the room like wildfire, but I felt only rising panic. "Jeannine, was this a local show? What station?"

"Oh, John what's-his-name? You know, on the country/western station...."

Very local. And very popular. "Shit!"

I bolted from the room, leaving behind a stunned silence. Everyone must have thought I had suddenly experienced an epiphany, or some mad compulsion to examine this *miracle flower*. I didn't even bother punching the clock; I ran straight for the parking lot.

As my car peeled out of the lot, I fumbled with the dial to find the station in question. I am not the kind of guy who ever listens to country music, so it certainly was not programmed on my stereo. But they had billboards all over town, so I knew the frequency.

It was the *all horror* channel, or at least that is what it had become to me. They were still talking about the back yard miracle, as they were now calling it. The DJ was talking to someone who was claiming to have just seen it. If I had a cell phone, I would have called and demanded to know who the hell these people were, and what they were doing in my yard. And when the DJ mentioned my street by name, I instead thought about calling a lawyer. But I did neither; I just drove as fast as I could.

At five blocks from home, I knew things had escalated. Cars lined both sides of the street. Throngs of people were walking, all in the direction of my home. I saw a news van parked on my front walk. A crowd of spectators stood in my driveway, and only moved after a shrill blast of my horn and revving of my engine.

"Hey, asshole," one of the spectators yelled as I jumped out. "We all want to see it, wait your turn!"

I didn't even bother to flip him off; I just pushed through the crowd surrounding my patio. There, I almost dropped when I saw what had become of my backyard.

At least a hundred people were standing in what had once been my beautiful garden. The ferns had been trampled into a sickly greet mat. Tiger lilies wilted upside down, dangling from broken stems. Children were swinging from the few remaining branches of the small willow tree and discarded paper cups, leaking melted ice and coca-cola, floated on the surface of my pond.

My heart sank. No, it broke in half. Eight years of hard work, eight years of determination and

passion laid waste. The fruits of my labor reduced to ash. The sight was one of total devastation and a cacophony of religious ecstasy from the people who had caused it.

"Get out of here!" I screamed, trying to push people towards the drive. "This is my house, go away!"

No one listened. They pushed back and glared at me as if they had every right to be here and I was the one intruding.

Despair was quickly turning to rage. I started shoving, kicking, punching—anything to force my way through the crowd. I might even have pushed over a nun; I didn't care.

As I slowly maneuvered closer to the apex of my personal hell, I saw Brian. That dickhead was standing on the embankment behind the pond, next to the collapsed rocks of the former waterfall, talking to a reporter. He was smiling, the reporter was smiling. Even the fucking camera man was smiling. Around them, there was nothing but rubble. Everything had been destroyed, stomped flat by the rapturous crowd. Only one thing remained standing, that horrible gladiola with the imaginary face.

April was conducting the actual viewing of the flower. Dressed in her best spandex, she led people, one at a time to see the miracle. Of course, April hadn't bothered to tell anyone to watch their step, no reason in her little mind to consider the value of my poor, unlamented phlox or slow-growing potentilla. She just beamed with joy and sudden celebrity status as she led an old woman to the gladiola.

The old woman leaned over the stem and beheld the image of a perfectly ordinary flower. But in her mind, it was magic. She stroked the bloom lovingly and then kissed the tip of her gnarled finger. She rose and a furor erupted from onlookers.

"Praise Jesus! It's a miracle! She can walk!"

"Of course she can walk," I screamed. "She was walking before! What the fuck is wrong with you people?"

My shock was receding, leaving in its wake only agony and rage. Still screaming, I fought my way through the mob of devoted parishioners. The summer sun was blistering. Between my lingering hangover and surging blood pressure, the pain in my head was nearly blinding. By the time I reached the damn flower, my face was red and drenched in sweat. I could hardly breathe. My chest ached.

"This is the man you want to talk to," Brian said, oblivious to the ranting that preceded my arrival.

The reporter also hadn't seemed to notice—quite a failing for his particular career choice. "Oh, so you grew the miracle flower. How does it feel to receive

such a blessing?"

"Blessing?" I spat the word as if it were poison. "Look around! Does any of this look like a blessing to you? My garden is ruined!"

"But the flower," Brian injected, "it's a sign!"

"It's not a sign! It is a *flower*! It's not even a good flower, it has to be held-up with sticks! Watch this..."

That flower offended me; the one thing in my garden that I liked least was the only thing remaining, leaning proudly against its bamboo stake—but among all this carnage, that was the only thing I could fix. In one quick motion, I reached for the gladiola and wrapped my fingers around stem, leaf and pole. I heaved. The son-of-a-bitching flower came free with only slight resistance, bulb and roots riding along without interruption. A large earthworm, half moored to clinging bits of dry dirt, twitched in shock, mirroring both the mood and mentality of the surrounding crowd.

They stood aghast, speechless. Many of them still wore expressions of self-induced ecstasy, deep-frozen by the sudden shock. A few disinterested children continued to play; their laughter echoed through the dense forest of horrified acolytes like the breeze through an abandoned temple from ancient Greece.

"What have you done?" whispered someone in the crowd, as his shock, and spirit, deflated.

Despite the carnage around me and the loss of so much hard work, I found the question perversely amusing. What have I done? I grew a flower and lacked the good sense to padlock the back gate. I grew a flower and failed to expect the scale of a nosey neighbor's mouth. I grew a flower without considering its impact to the superstitious masses.

I found myself laughing. Maybe it was the infernal heat pushing my sanity just out of reach, or perhaps it was the only logical conclusion to the absurd, albeit costly, circumstances of the past few hours. Tomorrow I would have to pick up the pieces, start clearing the wreckage from what had once been the centerpiece of my daily life. But for now, as the crowd, confused and somewhat lost, began to wander off in silence, I could only laugh.

Room 603

Danielle Rabine

Short Story

FIRST PLACE

The genius of this very short story lies in how much it accomplishes in such a short space. When the narrator comes home from college to visit his legendarily tough uncle in the hospital, the reader expects the story to keep a narrow focus on the narrator and the uncle, but instead, we see a complicated, changing relationship between the narrator and his older brother and how they come together to learn something both profound and endearing at the foot of their uncle's hospital bed.

"Your Uncle Gerald went into the hospital last night," my mother sniffled into the phone during one of our weekly phone conversations while I was away at college. Only a moment before we had been discussing my college's Homecoming activities of the previous weekend—the parade, the football game, the girl I met at the frat party. My mom just let me regurgitate stories about my petty college life and kept the purpose of her call hidden until I had managed to finally take a breath.

I felt like I was sitting in the dentist's chair having x-rays taken of my mouth. The x-ray apparatus visible in the corner of my eye, I sat motionless as my mother's words invaded me. It felt like the invisible, powerful current that pulsed through my body from out of the machine, leaving me in a self-induced paralyzed state. "Really?" I asked my mother.

"Yes," she stated simply, her composure regained, "and you'll need to come home."

"Well, what happened?" I asked solemnly.

"Hugh, I'm sorry, I just don't want to talk about it. Your brother is on his way to get you."

She hung up the phone, and I slumped down on a chair all alone in my empty dorm room pondering the idea of that bull of a man being confined to a hospital bed. Surely, Uncle Gerald was just perching on the fringe of the cliff of life being pried from the edge, finger by finger, secretly supporting himself with his own teeth by gnawing into the edge of the rocks. Surely, there was some misunderstanding, there had to be another Gerald Bourbeau, a weak florist from Portland who had been admitted with the stomach flu, and my mother was contacted accidentally. There wasn't a circumstance that I could think of that would bring Uncle Gerald to humble himself into being admitting into a hospital. There wasn't a thing in the world that could alter Uncle Gerald's stance, be it a hurricane wind or a crackpot democrat.

My older brother, Tim, arrived that evening to take

me home. I hadn't seen him since our family's Fourth of July camping trip even though he only lived an hour from home. After he married and started having a family and I went off to college, it was easy to lose touch for extended periods of time. He was nine years older than me as well, and we were decently close growing up, but as our lives were in different stages we rarely connected.

"Do you always wear khakis on casual occasions?" I asked, giving him a solid hug in greeting.

"I guess I never really thought about it," Tim shrugged, grinning. I slipped into the front seat of his car, and we began the two hour drive home.

"You look like a regular dad," I smiled.

"You look like a regular college kid." He gestured to the cords of the headphones that were draped around my neck.

"So what is the deal with Uncle Gerald?" I asked, still confused since my mom had delivered the news.

Tim shook his head and inhaled deeply. "I don't know. I asked mom too, and she refuses to talk about it. She just told me that someone needed to bring you home."

"Well, thanks," I replied, "I know this has to be hard for her since he's her only brother and all. I am just afraid of what we will see once we get there. Uncle Gerald is the toughest man I know and imagining him in a hospital at all is giving me the shivers."

"I know. I'm expecting half of Uncle Gerald's brain on the table next to him because his benching bar fell on his face or wrapped in a full body cast from third degree burns caused by his motorcycle exploding mid-ride. He would never consciously be admitted into a hospital."

For the rest of the car ride we exchanged different ideas of how we would find Uncle Gerald and reminisced on his unmatched manliness. Uncle Gerald was the epitome of a man—we had known

this at a young age.

Tim told the story of Uncle Gerald and his cow. One December his cattle count was low on his farm, and so he went out into the field to look for his one missing heifer. As he crossed a stream about a quarter mile back on his property he saw the cow had fallen into the water. It was struggling to move as the icy water sliced at its back. Uncle Gerald grabbed the cow by its hooves and pulled. His feet slipped off the edge of the bank and he landed on a chunk of ice. Furious with the situation, Uncle Gerald chucked his work boots right into the river, yanked on the cow, and tugged it all the way back to the barn in his bare feet through four inches of snow.

"I never understood why he didn't just lead the cow home," I said after Tim had finished the story. "The cow was perfectly capable of walking."

"He was just that angry," Tim explained, "He was that tough that it didn't even faze him."

"What a macho man."

"I remember I hated visiting him so much. I helped him with chores the whole day, and if there was any little sign of protest, he would puff out his chest and holler in his scruffy voice, 'This is what men do. If you have a problem, go inside and crochet like a little queer.' But I had no idea what a queer was at age ten so I would just push through digging a trench, or washing his car, or cutting hay with him," Tim laughed.

When we got back to our hometown, we drove straight to the hospital to meet up with the rest of our family. My parents were huddled in the hospital waiting room, my dad with his arm around my mother. She was so relieved when Tim and I entered the room. It had been months since she had seen either of her sons.

My mom nudged Tim and me, "Go on ahead and see your uncle, he knows that you're coming. He is in Room 603."

We crept down the hall of the quiet hospital together. We passed open doors with elderly men in beds attached to machines, staring blankly up at the baseball game on televisions mounted on the wall. We passed closed doors that provided a mystery to their contents. Then we came to Uncle Gerald's room. Tim knocked on the open door and we slipped inside.

Uncle Gerald's strength was that of the sturdiest bridge. He had the sass of ten cowboys. He was a man—a man that could not be shaken or stirred but liked his whiskey as strong as that red skin on the back of his neck that had battled decades of an ornery sun. But there he was wheezing through his oxygen tube, which provided the elixir of life, wrapped

up in those sterile white sheets like a sissy-man.

The beeps and buzzes of the wires and machines recorded his every twitch, projecting each finding in bright red so invasively and candidly to the rest of those in the hospital room. Uncle Gerald used to be a mystery until I saw him in that hospital bed, but now anyone who peeked into his room could tell if he took a breath or needed to eat. Despite being restricted to a bed, he managed to flutter his eyes open and whisper to me with such devotion, "Hughey, a cig would really hit the spot right now."

I smiled a sad smile at Tim. Along with being the toughest man, Uncle Gerald was also the most dedicated smoker I knew.

"I'm just joshing you," he grunted. "The way they got me hooked up here, there ain't a thing I want."

I was so surprised how calm Uncle Gerald looked in his hospital bed. He seemed so content and peaceful, like he had no place else that he would rather be than in that room attached to an oxygen tank. He would pass up any night at the bar or day working on his pickup.

"I'm just as happy as a fly on a crap-pile," he laughed scruffily as he leaned out of his bed. "Grab a chair, and tell me how you men have been."

Tim and I told Uncle Gerald about our lives, about our accomplishments and our dreams. He sat back with a warm grin stretched across his leathery face. When prompted, he refused to talk about himself or explain how he came to being in the hospital.

"I just want to bask in the glory of my nephews," he insisted with that same relaxed smile.

After about an hour he began to nod off, and so Tim and I decided to quietly exit the room, leaving the tender Uncle Gerald to nap.

Tim and I strolled past the open doors where the men watched T.V., the closed doors which contained the unknown, and commented on Uncle Gerald's transformation.

"What happened to Uncle Gerald?" Tim asked as we returned to the waiting room.

My mother sighed, "Some people just change."

Crap from the Magi

Brent Seth

Short Story

SECOND PLACE

This Rube Goldberg story – meaning we follow one object through a series of people who are in possession of it – offers a delightful and thought-provoking take on the idea that one person's garbage is another person's treasure. The language here is tight and smart and funny, and the characters seem so real that we can look out our windows and see these people in our neighborhood. What a fun, smart piece of writing!

It was only a few days before Thanksgiving when Caroline tripped over the box on her front porch. She had just dragged the trash to the curb, but the pounding rain had prevented her from noticing the mailman's delivery. Caroline swore under her breath as she picked herself off the floor and gathered the stack of bills and seasonal catalogues along with the damp package.

Once in the kitchen, Caroline set the box on the counter. There was no return address, but that hardly mattered. This box had been sent before; the old address crossed out with a dull Sharpie, but still visible: Roberta, of course.

Carline sighed. Her mother-in-law seemed to delight in sending used gifts, so it was no surprise she would send them in a used box. Flat-Rate box from the Post Office; if it fits, it ships. Surly Roberta knew she could have gotten a new one for exactly the same cost.

Since the garbage would be collected tomorrow morning, there was plenty of time to inspect the contents and deal with them accordingly. Last year's gift had been a chipped ceramic lotion dispenser, complete with hard, yellowed lotion. The year before had seen a plastic cookie jar in the shape of a cow—exactly what every woman wants. A cow to contain something that will make its owner look like a cow. The kids use it to hold Legos.

There was enough packing tape on the box to wallpaper a small den. This was another of Roberta's perverse joys. The only thing worse than getting a lousy gift was the work it required to unwrap. Mother would have been disappointed; the damp cardboard allowed the tape to pull away with ease.

Caroline did not react when she found the metal water pitcher inside. She was not expecting anything in particular, but knew in general that it would be ghastly. The pitcher was strangely large, and apparently did not quite fit in the box, as it had been noticeably flattened. Roberta must have placed it in the box, closed the flaps, and leaned her considerable weight to force the box into a condition acceptable by the postal authorities.

The pitcher rocked on its warped base when Caroline set it on the counter. There was no way to guess why Roberta had chosen this particular item. Possibly, she had completely purged her home of unwanted material, forcing her to seek new sources. More likely, someone else had sent this trash to Roberta, who in turn promptly resealed the box, changed the address and paid it forward. That would also explain why it had come so early.

A better question, and one that Caroline soon found herself evaluating, was why would someone make this thing in the first place? No one uses water pitchers anymore, and this piece of hammered tin was far from decorative. There was an image on the body of the pitcher, a pastoral scene with a rooster pecking under a sprawling elm. You had to squint and tilt your head to one side to see it; at a quick glance, it looked more like a bagpipe superimposed over an autopsy table.

At least the pitcher held a large volume of space, and could certainly stand the pressure of a few pounds of Legos. Caroline quickly reconsidered. The rolled edges of the tin were too sharp. Her initial solution had been the best one, and without hesitation, Caroline dropped the pitcher back in the box, and deposited them both in the recycle bin out front.

Howard Brady had been working the next block as he watched Caroline dash back to her house. As Port Huron's most accomplished trash-picker, Howard could spot scrap metal at three hundred yards. Abandoning his dissection of an aluminum storm window, he pedaled his reclaimed bike up the street.

Still wheezing from the trip, Howard examined the new treasure. Yes, it was tin, and in perfect condition. Why would anyone throw this away? Alma could put this on her sideboard.

The pitcher was a little too large to fit in the milk crate Howard had duct taped to his handlebars. He had already snagged a crumpled piece of downspout and several inches of copper wire, still soldered on the printed circuits they had once powered. But you can't let good metal go to waste, so Harold shoved

the wires into the pitcher, slicing his finger in the process.

Perhaps it was the fact that his hands were filthy from the day's work that launched the Tetanus infection, or maybe just a natural attribute offered by the pitcher itself was never known. Mrs. Brady certainly didn't blame the pitcher a few weeks later when she filled it with daisies sent by a neighbor. This was a big bundle of daisies, like the one's Alma had often admired in the cold case at Wal-Mart.

Too bad it takes a tragedy to get nice things, Alma thought as she carried the pitcher to the table. There was already a large selection of food in place; mostly casseroles inspired by the fine people at Campbell's. Mrs. Brady would need all the space when family started arriving before the service. She took the daisies into the living room. Here, people could enjoy the fragrance while they ate. The pitcher sat nicely on the doily atop the television. It had been one of the last console televisions ever made, and even though the color had faded, it still worked to watch Springer or the Wheel.

Alma didn't notice the trickle of water slowly soaking the doily. Aunt Pat didn't see it either when she leaned over for a sniff. In fact, no one in the family knew what to tell the fire department six hours later as they stood in the snow, warmed by the glare of the raging inferno.

Neighbors and friends were very consoling to Mrs. Brady, bemoaning the tragedy of losing both her husband, and the collection of antiques he had built for so long. But Mrs. Brady was okay. Harold had not approved of insurance, certain it was just a big scam by those college boys, but Alma had known better. She had secretly put away small portions of the monthly disability checks Harold had been getting from the railroad for the past forty years. With this and the illicitly purchased insurance, she would be able to buy herself a brand-new double wide, and even some good furniture from IKEA. Merry Christmas to me!

The fire raged well into the night. Harold had collected so many antiques, all for free, that once it started the fire spread quickly. The family had been at the funeral home, saying goodbye to father, so no one had noticed the sparks, the exploding vacuum tube, or sudden engulfment of every issue of the Ladies Home Journal published since 1983. From there it had been a short journey to the curtains and beyond.

By morning, the source of the blaze was identified. The melted plastic of the television had buckled, tossing the pitcher of charred flowers into a pile of periodic ash. It was spotted by junior fireman Daniel Walsh. He had overheard some of the neighbors talking about how this house had been filled with

valuable antiques, but most of what he saw was the remains of old junk, much like the house itself had been. But something about this pitcher grabbed his eye. The heat had warped the tin even further and burnished it with a truly aged-looking finish. There were no words stamped on the bottom, nothing to indicate mass production in Taiwan, so this could have been legitimate. Besides, it depicted a chicken. Everything in Daniel's wife's kitchen had a chicken motif.

Daniel knew this was technically stealing. But as he slipped the pitcher under his raincoat, he reminded himself how happy the widow had been when they confirmed the accidental nature of the fire. Actually, she had cheered and vowed to begin shopping immediately—which should be a chore as today was Christmas Eve.

And that was the *real* reason for stealing the pitcher. Today was Christmas Eve, and he still had not gotten a gift for his wife. Oh, he wanted to, but shopping is such a pain, especially this time of year. And she does love chickens.

He would have to wrap it though, and that would mean shopping. As Daniel sat in his truck that afternoon, cleaning the smoke and ash off the pitcher, he came up with a better idea. On his way home, he stopped at the post office and picked up one of those Flat Rate boxes. They let you have them for free, and you don't have to pay anything if you don't actually mail it. They even let you use packing tape.

Daniel carefully wrapped the pitcher in bubble wrap—which he did pay for—and placed it lovingly in the box. After telling the desk clerk he had forgotten the address and would be back on Monday, he returned to his truck. With an old Sharpie from the glove box, Daniel addressed the package to himself c/o the fire station. There was no postage, of course, but he was sure his wife wouldn't notice. He would just tell her he bought this lovely antique on E-bay and it arrived today.

From that point, things didn't go exactly as planned; including Daniel's actual, but unintended, return to the post office on Monday afternoon. After explaining to the guys at work how he had spent most of Christmas Eve at the emergency room for a Tetanus shot and treatment for a cut forehead. Daniel still didn't understand why the gift had so sharply annoyed his wife. She still wasn't speaking to him, so the mystery might linger for days or weeks yet to come.

Since his wife apparently hated the pitcher, Daniel decided it should go to someone who would appreciate it. At the little table in the post office, Daniel crossed out his name on the box and addressed it to his mother, Mrs. Roberta Walsh....



Tumbling Down

Sherrie Young

Ceramic

HONORABLE MENTION



David Carson

Travis Dundas

Digital

HONORABLE MENTION

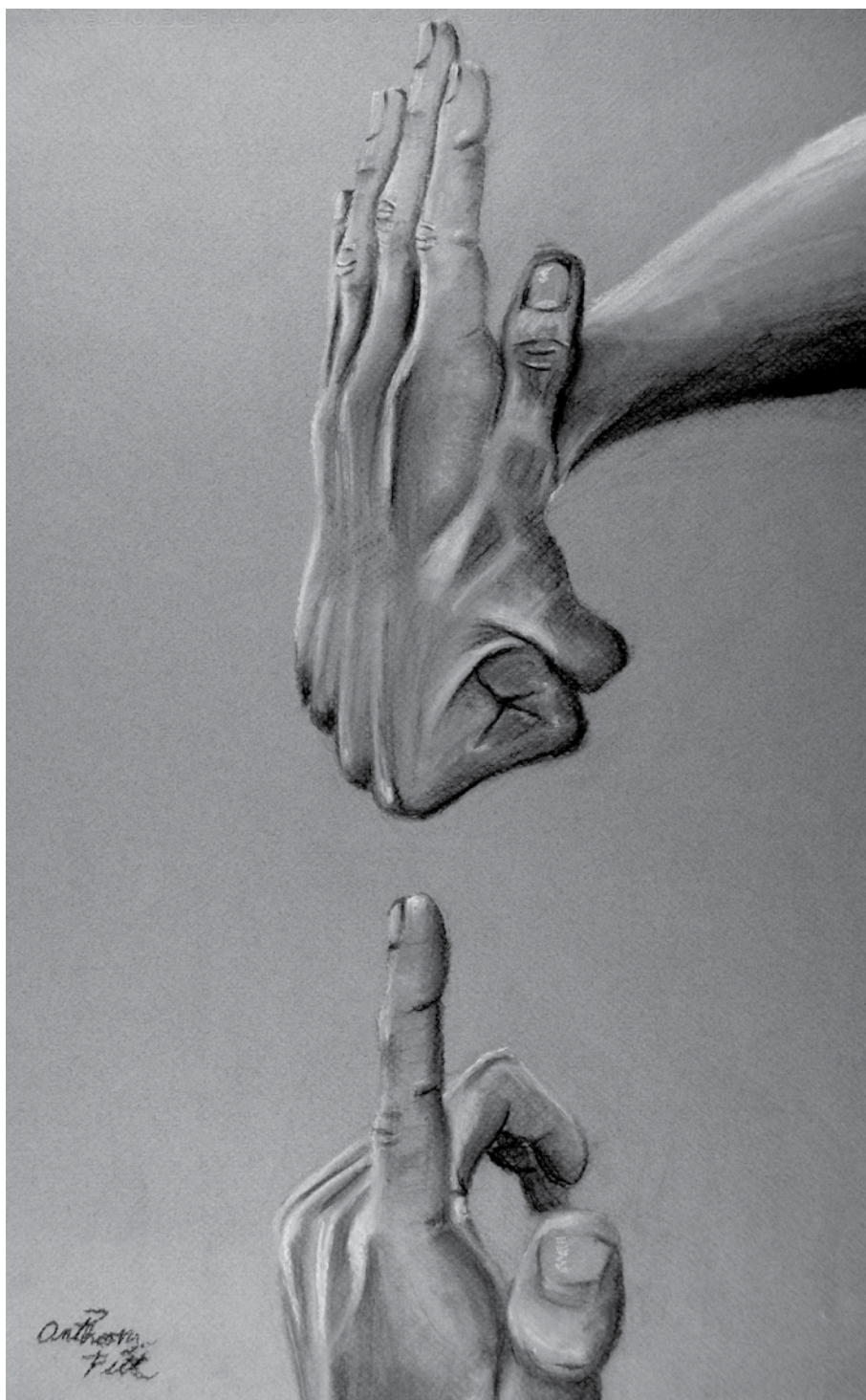


Stop...Hammertime

Anthony Petit

Charcoal and chalk

HONORABLE MENTION

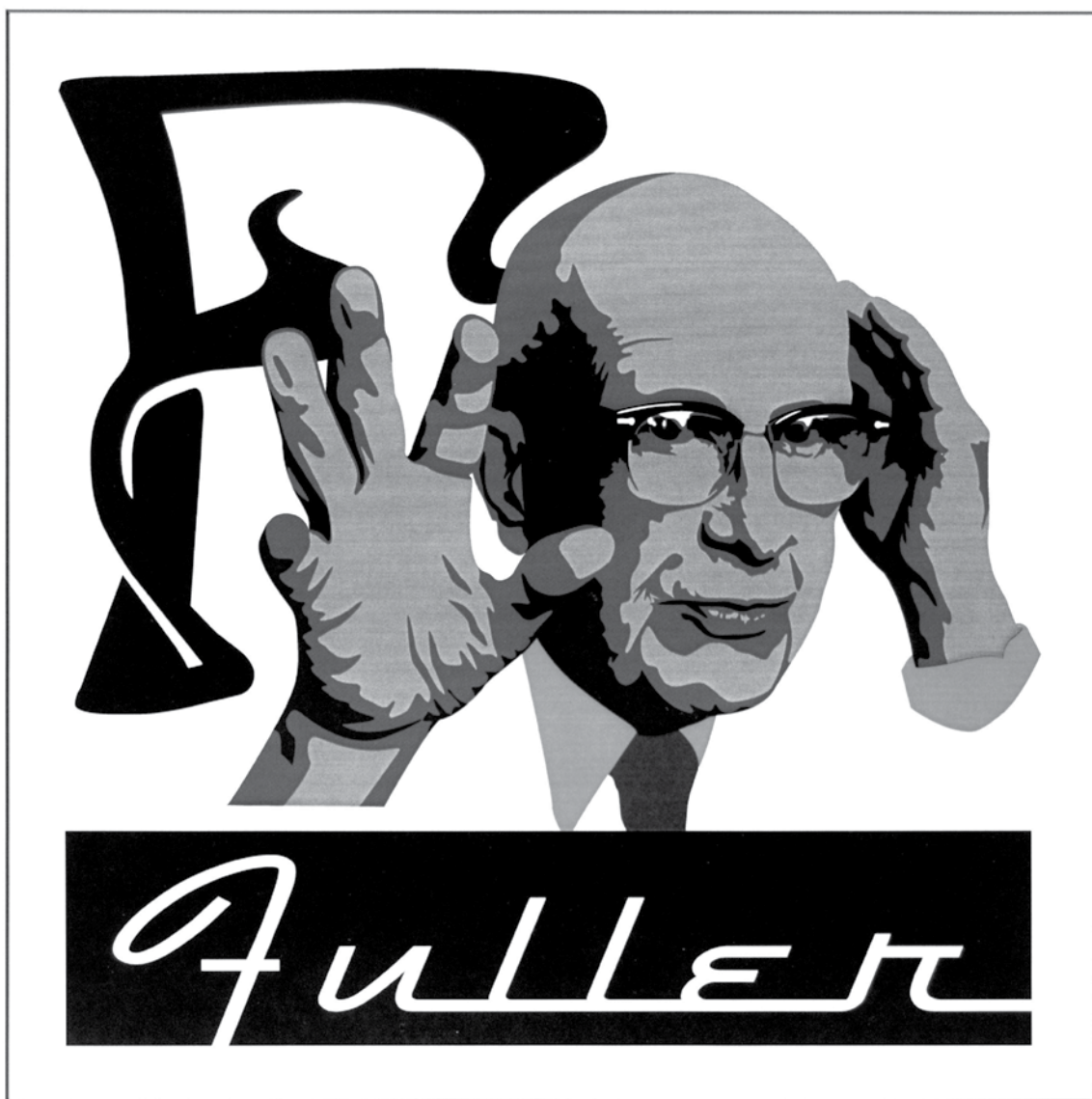


Fuller

Travis Dundas

Digital

HONORABLE MENTION



Coiled Sea Sponge

Jocelyn Graziadei

Ceramic

HONORABLE MENTION



Grandma and Great Aunt

Clarissa Karling

Linocut print

HONORABLE MENTION

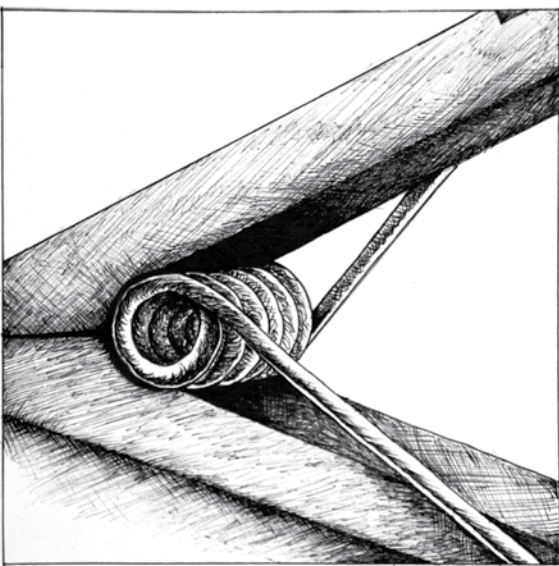
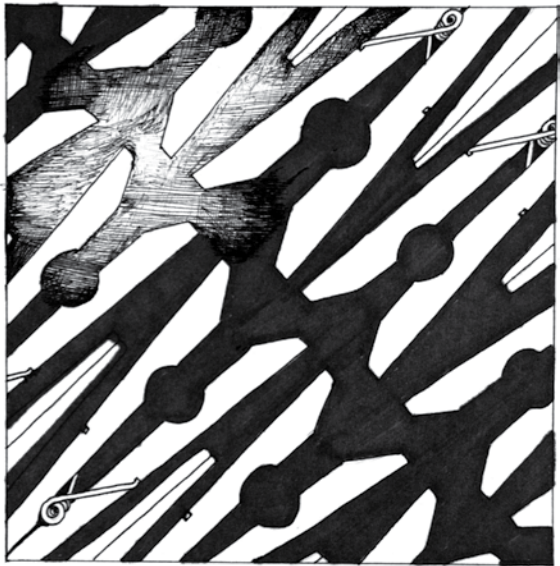
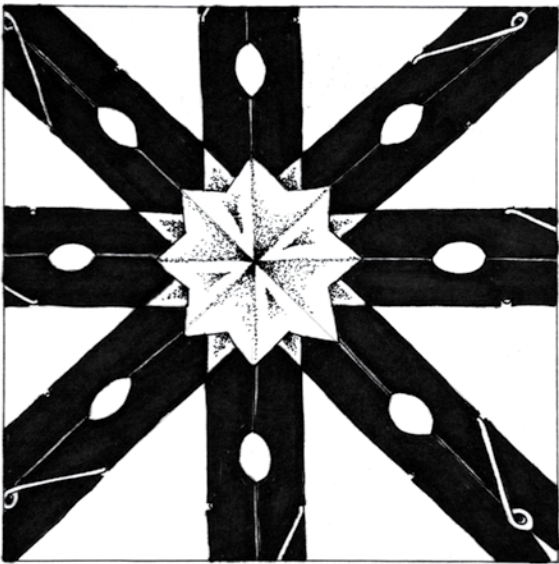


Hang Me Up to Dry

Betsy Vollmar

Ink

HONORABLE MENTION



The Devil's Skateboard

Meghan Barriger

Drawing/Digital

HONORABLE MENTION



Excerpt from MAR, Page 3

Matthew Olack

Digital

HONORABLE MENTION



Into the Fray

Ceramic

Betsy Vollmar

HONORABLE MENTION



Flutter

Lauren Formiller

Charcoal

HONORABLE MENTION

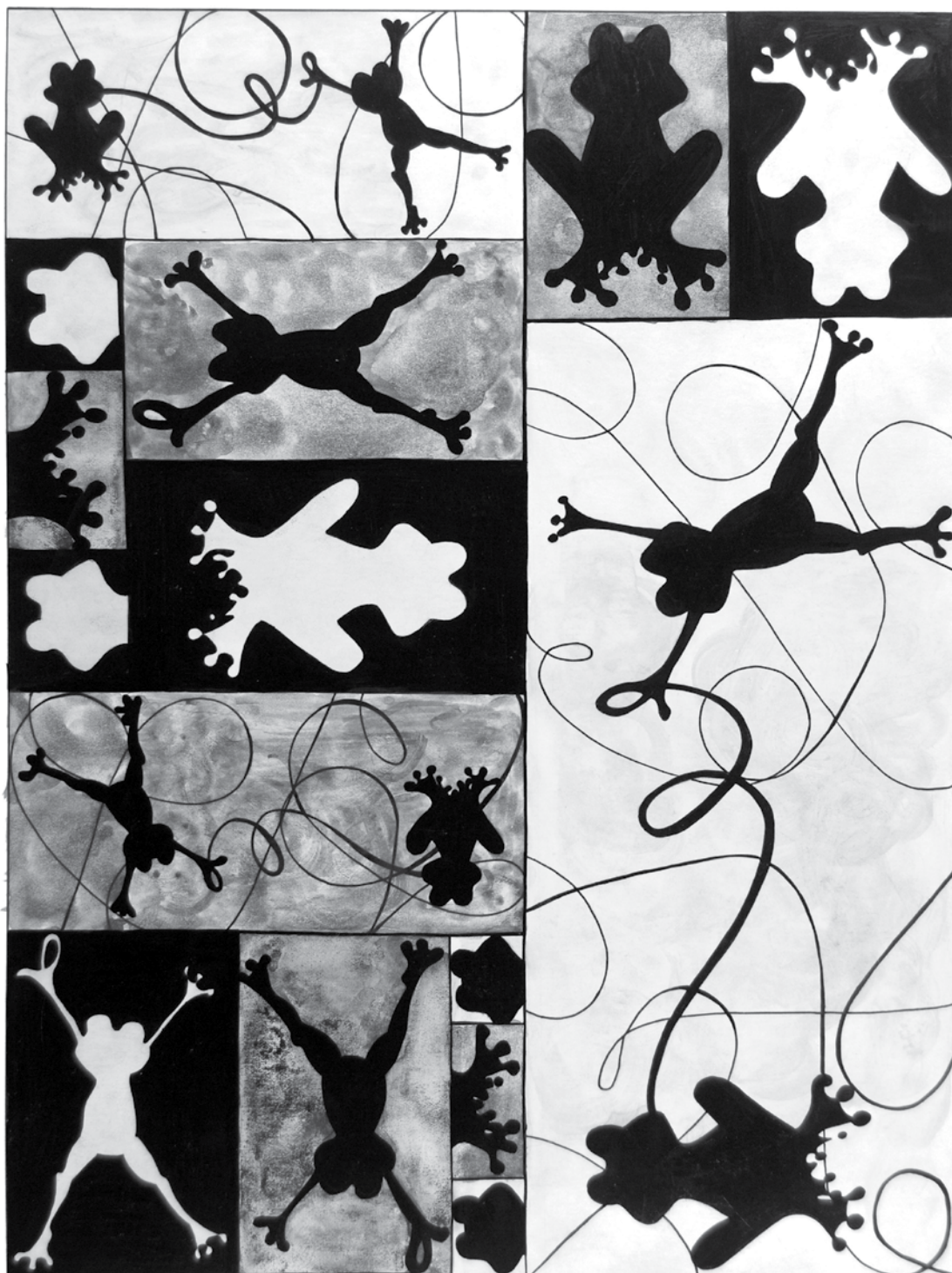


How to Catch a Man

Sheryl Penzien

Ink

HONORABLE MENTION



Bauhaus and Bradbury Thompson

Kim Tomlin

Digital

HONORABLE MENTION



Cracked Earth

Jocelyn Graziadei

Ceramic

HONORABLE MENTION



Anchor and Chain

Mark Brant

Ceramic

HONORABLE MENTION



Swine Flu

Anthony Petit

Chalk

HONORABLE MENTION



Dommer

Sheryl Penzien

Ink

HONORABLE MENTION



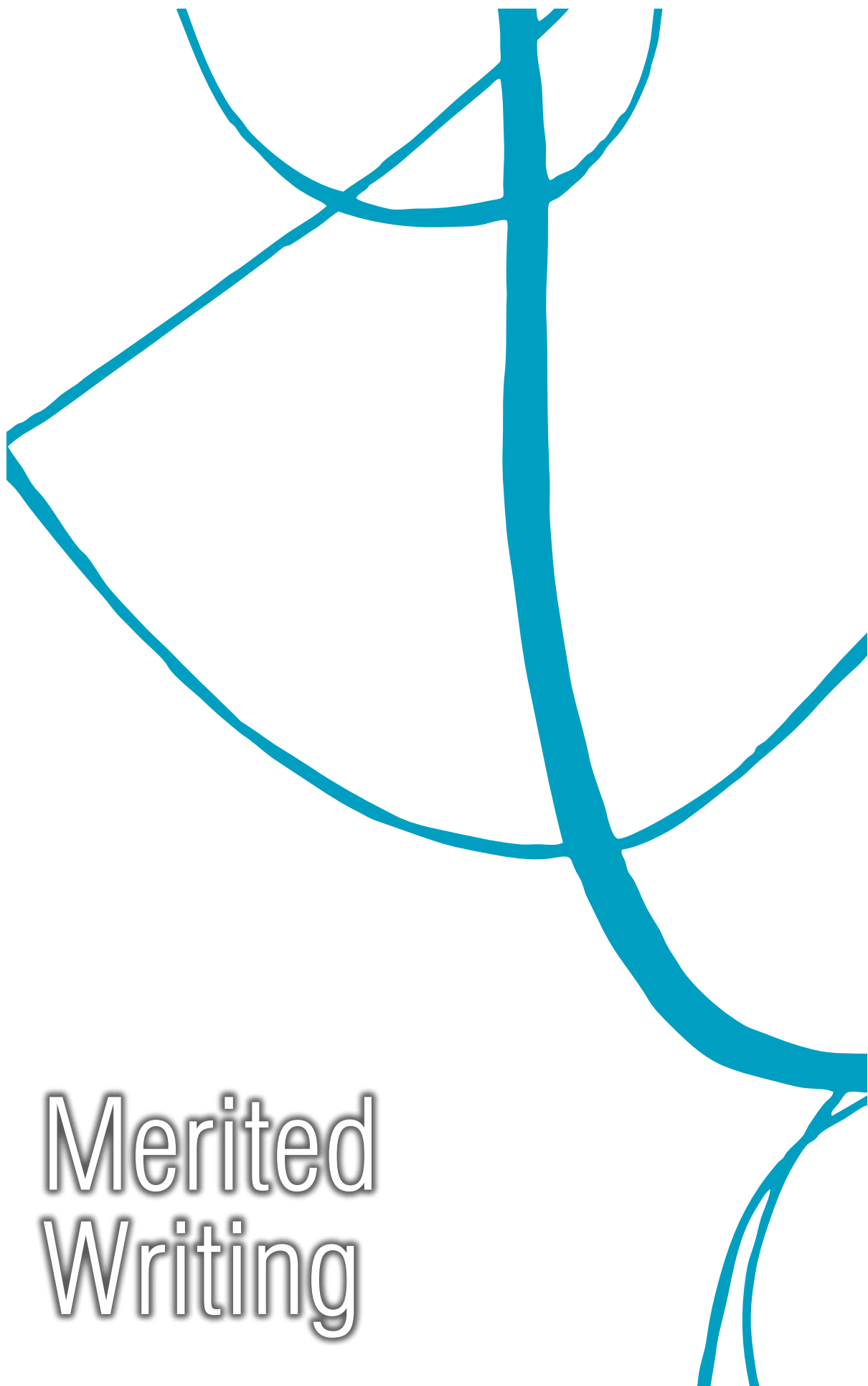
Dom

Ink

Sheryl Penzien

HONORABLE MENTION





Merited
Writing

Missing You

Patricia Koroly

Poem

HONORABLE MENTION

Trying to remember her perfume,
I press my nose to her shirt;
Something tickles; a stray hair.
Her scent reminds me of feather reed grass,
And our first meeting at the ivy-shrouded fountain.
Casually tossed upon the dresser is her purse
She'd clutch it tightly as I sped in my roadster.
My eyes meet hers in the picture frame,
Long arms wrapped around a soccer ball.
I could never return to that stone bridge.

Swing

Poem

Ashley Sherman

HONORABLE MENTION

There it sits,
More still than an owl,
As quiet as the unheard whispers in the wind.
Two poles and a bench,
Made of unstained wood.
Rabbits gather round as the sun is rising,
Nibbling off the grape vine that lies behind.
An apple tree to either side,
The smell of fresh lilacs surrounds.
This is where peace is found.
A place to relax,
Let the world unwind.
Stressful thoughts being taken away,
As you drift off to the ocean breeze.

Respectable Retirees

Deborah Robinson

Short Story

HONORABLE MENTION

Heading toward the huge brick building I try to remember why I thought this was such a good idea. What was I thinking? What purpose could this possibly serve? Retirement was supposed to mean...retired! The kids speeding past me seem to be around eleven or twelve years old. My granddaughter is older than them...oh, maybe it's "take your kid to work day?" Well, I think the advisor said that I had four full days of class in order to get a full refund. Okay, deep breath!

A kid with a Mohawk, 82nd Airborne symbol on each bare bicep and black undershirt held the classroom door for me. He smiled through studded lips as he muttered, "You the teacher? I've gotta leave early for my probation appointment. They said if I miss one more time... well, I won't be in class for sixty to ninety days. I'll be in a whole other institution for awhile, if ya know what I mean." Mr. Tattoo laughed nervously. I just smiled up dumbly and plopped into a chair beside a cute little 12-year-old in a very low-cut top. *Yikes! Okay, she can't be twelve but she looks so young! She smiles at me and moves her stuff way, way over to give the old lady room. Hate to see the old lady fall and break a hip!*

I set my pretty new, pink backpack down, pulled my dress down over my knees and took out a note book and pencil. Two perfectly sharpened pencils. *Okay, I'm ready for this!* All eyes looked toward the door, as a frowning middle-aged woman rushed in the door and headed toward the front desk. She dropped her heavy bags, sighed and looked up as Mr. Tattoo headed up to her desk. She nodded as he retold the story. Her nod turned to a slow, fatigued head shake as he walked back to his seat. He looked happy with her response.

"I will be handing out the syllabus and it will be your responsibility to know what's in it. You will also be responsible for checking online for last minute assignment or classroom changes. Being on time for the start of this class is crucial!" *Syllabus, what on earth is a syllabus? Online...this wasn't supposed to be that kind of class! Man is it hot in here; I suppose these kids don't know about hot flashes either! Calm down, you have time to cancel this whole thing and go home and act like a respectable retired woman.*

Missing my soaps two days a week has been a real concern!

The students looked through the three page document and seemed familiar with the concept. I think it's just a schedule and the rules. So, why not call this the schedule and rules? *This is an English class, so why can't they just speak English...you know, middle aged English?*

The tired-looking teacher explained what we need to do in order to get a decent grade and assigned two chapters to read. "I will dismiss class early today so you can get a head start on your assignment." She glanced over at Mr. Tattoo as he wiped his brow in relief. This announcement seemed to make the whole class come to life. They started packing things into their backpacks and grabbed their Red Bull cans, seemingly ready to launch. "We're going to have a short get-acquainted exercise first, so everyone sit down and find a partner. Choose someone you don't already know."

That shouldn't be too hard, I don't know anyone! I forced a smile and looked around. Oh boy, Mr. Tattoo and I were the only ones who haven't paired up.

"I'd like you to interview one another and then introduce your partner to the class. Please be specific with your questions; include educational goals, career plans and hobbies. Five minutes should be plenty, so go ahead and get started."

"You wanna go first, Ma'am? I can ask you, and then you can ask me. Sound okay, Ma'am?" He eagerly clicked open his pen labeled, "Piercing Palace." "So, what's your name? What you wanna be? You probably like to sew and cook. Okay, I gotta tell you, I ain't real good at spelling and stuff. Sorry you had to get stuck with me, Ma'am."

As my shoulders began to relax a little I couldn't help but smile at the kid sitting across from me. No doubt, we were from different planets. "My name is Betty Lou, B-E-T-T-Y, new word, L-O-U and I hope to keep my mind sharp by taking classes. I like water aerobics, reading and I'm really sick and tired of cooking and sewing. How is that? Did I cover everything? Sorry, Buddy, that's A-E-R-O-B-I-C-S." Working hard not to watch his struggle with the words, I waited quietly.

My turn to ask questions finally came and I learned that my friend's name was really Brian and that he was going into criminal justice. "The Math is killing me, I don't think I'm gonna pass. I want to be a cop but the book work is so damned...I mean darn hard! Sorry Ma'am. I just can't think straight sometimes...I used to like to read. Now, most of my extra time gets spent at the Veterans Hospital."

"Okay, times up! Who would like to come up and share first? Someone has to start. Just a reminder, the sooner we do this, the sooner you'll be dismissed!"

Brian smiled, looked over at me and raised his hand.

*Oh no, why did he raise his hand? This is bad enough without going first! I am sweating again and Mr. Tattoo, I mean Brian, just **has** to raise his hand! I should've left while I could! Deep breath, Betty Lou....*

Brian volunteered to start while he and I stood like the very "Odd Couple" in front of the class. He explained why I was going to school, what I liked doing and finished his little spiel with, "this lady rocks!" My face felt a little bit hotter as the class chuckled and even the teacher smiled a little.

Oh no, it's my turn already! "Well, this is Brian and he wants to be a police officer." I heard a little laughing, and I glared at the students delivering the rude responses. "Brian is working hard at his classes and he volunteers down at the VA Center. I'm sure he'll do well in whatever he tries. Thank you, I guess that's about it. Did I mention that Brian helped to defend our freedom? We all owe him a handshake and a big thank you."

Brian and I returned to our seats as the next victims, I mean students, took their turn in front of the class. Brian leaned over and whispered, "That was real nice what you said about me. Do you really think I can do this? I was on the honor roll in high school. The recruiter came to see me when I was in the eleventh grade and I thought free college sounded good. My folks don't have a lot. It all just sort of fell to crap after I got back from Afghanistan. The guys say it'll get better if I just keep going to my appointments and stay outta the booze. I just like to take the edge off with a couple of beers, and it always seems to turn ugly. My Ma says I'm just like my Dad. *I resist the urge to reach over and hug the tattooed, pierced...sweet boy.*

"Please complete the assigned reading and be ready for a ten question quiz over the material on Thursday. I'm glad that you have all decided to sign up for this class and hope that you will enjoy it." I

smiled up at the teacher and she smiled back. "We have a very diverse class and I hope that we can learn from each other. Some of you are fresh out of high school and some are a little more mature." *Who is she calling "mature"? I can probably add some insight to the "ole days." These kids probably think a typewriter is an antique. Maybe it is. I just might not hate this.*

*I **could** read two chapters. I like my pink backpack. What if Brian needs a partner on Thursday? I could go school clothes shopping on my way home. New jeans and some boots would be nice.* "Bye Brian, see you Thursday. Get that reading done, Buddy. Do **not** lose that schedule...I mean, syllabus.

Out of the Mouth of Babes

Mick Goode

Short Story

HONORABLE MENTION

The knocking on the door started again. Ken looked at Charlene and asked, "Were you expecting anyone, Darlin'?"

"No, Sugar, I wasn't," Charlene replied, "were you? No, you keep an eye on that stew, I'll see who it is." Running to the front door, she peeked out the curtain, then opened the door. "Aunt Lynne, what are you doing here? Come in, come in. It's too cold out there to mill about."

"Good afternoon, Char. Are you ready?" Lynne asked, as she kissed Charlene's cheek. "Where is Kenny hiding?"

"He's your nephew, you tell me?"

"Oh, he's in the kitchen experimenting again?" Lynne laughed.

"Yep. He is showing me how to make a stew, as if I never had before." Char snickered and led Lynne back to the kitchen. "Kenny, it's for you."

"Aunt Lynne, why are you here?"

"Didn't the gang tell you that you were supposed to have supper over at Katie's house tonight?" Lynne kissed Ken on the cheek. "That smells good, but you started that too early. It can keep until tomorrow, I'm sure."

"No one told me a damned thing about going to eat at Katie's." Ken countered. "I got supper covered. They can wait until afterwards, certainly."

"I was asked to swing by and get the pair of you, and bring you over there. They told me I could drag you to Kathleen's house by your toes, if necessary, but both of you were eating over there, tonight."

"Buttercup, did they give you a hint of what's going on?"

"No, Kenny. This is the first I heard of this." Charlene responded. "Did they say why, Auntie L?"

"Not to me. I know they are cooking a feast and want the pair of you there. After that, I'm in the dark. I told them that you probably had plans, and I had a few things I should get done, but they were insistent." Lynne sighed.

"Which ones insisted? The gals or guys? I know the kids would, if they thought I'd be heading over." Ken shook his head and looked at Charlene. "It's up to you, Darlin'. What's your pleasure?"

"Not in front of your aunt!" Charlene blushed. "Who's going to be over there?"

"Probably just the crew you met this morning, Candy and Jimmy, and all their kids. It's just a small army. If you don't want to, that's cool by me."

"No, I want to meet the kids. The way Gwen goes on about hers, I have to see if they are as precious as she claims." Char informed him. "Will that stay until tomorrow?"

"I guess it will." Ken turned the fire off and moved the pot to a cold burner. "Shall we, ladies?"

Charlene had her coat on and his in her hands, when he got to the door. "Come on, Kenny. I'm hungry."

"I promise you, you will get fed. It's just going to be sixteen blocks later than normal." he laughed, slipped on his coat, and kissed her. "You are driving, Lynne, or are we?"

"I will. Come on, kiddies, I know she got a stuffed roast waiting, and God knows what else." Lynne said as she opened the door. "Grab the keys, and let's get."

As they drove over to Katie's house, Charlene recounted how the gang showed up with Ken at the truck stop where she waited tables. "I knew half of them beforehand, and I knew he mentioned them by name, but didn't put two and two together until lunch rush. I swear, Aunt Lynne, I think they were more surprised to find out I knew him, than the other way around."

"Honestly, I was more surprised that we pulled up there, than that they knew you already." Kenny told her, as they pulled up. "Here we are, Darlin'; I told you supper wouldn't be too long."

"That's why I love you so—you are honest to a fault," Char gushed, and kissed Ken.

"Hey kids, let's get in the house, before they come and drag us inside?" Lynne suggested, as she shut the motor off and opened the door. The pair in the back seat broke for air and followed Lynne up on the stoop, and waited for the ones inside to open the door.

Tony opened the door. "Hey folk, come in before the cold does. Katie and my wife are somewhere around here...."

"Hopefully Katie is keeping Gwen away from the stove, T." Ken remarked, as Katie appeared.

"Kenny, behave. Charlene, welcome to my house."

Come in, shed your coat and stay awhile. Kenny, make yourself useful, and go hang up your coats; you must come with me, young lady.” Katie said, steering Charlene towards the kitchen.

Ken followed instructions; when he returned, he saw she was swarmed with kids. Charlene was introducing herself and making friends. He bent down to tie his shoe, when Carrie came running up and kissed his cheek. “She’s pretty. Are you going to get married to her?”

“Well I would like to, but that is up to her. I got to ask her, and she has to say yes....” Ken got out, before she was replaced by Anna, Sean, Ian and Frankie. They hugged him and told him that she and he could get hitched. In a flash, he knew what was going to happen, but couldn’t find his voice to stop the child in time.

Carrie had come up, and tugged Char on the sleeve. Char bent down and said. “...and who is this pretty girl? My name is Miss Charlene. What is your name, darlin’?”

“Hi, my name is Carrie. Say yes, please?”

“Say yes to what, child?”

“You need to tell Uncle Kenny yes. Then you will be Aunt Charlene, and you won’t be lonesome no more, and he won’t be lonesome no more either. Uncle Kenny is good at making people not lonesome, but he is, cuz there’s no Aunt Kenny. If you say yes, you’d be Aunt Charlene, which would be better than an Aunt Kenny, and you won’t be lonesome, and he won’t be lonesome and everybody will be happy. Say yes. Please?” she gushed out, batting her little blue eyes.

Everything stopped! A deafening silence descended over the house; the type of silence one finds in cathedrals and bowling alleys at 3 AM, when the only ones in the place are you and God; you scarcely want to breathe, afraid to destroy the ambiance. In this eternity, you swear you saw the billions of civilizations rise, rule, and fall, like the tide against the cliffs. This stillness lasted all of twenty seconds.

“Carolyn Erin Murphy! Where on earth did you come up with that? Charlene, I’m sorry; I don’t know what got into that child...” Maria apologized. All eyes turned to Ken; some wondered, others thought that he put her up to that question. Before the accusations could become vocalized, he cleared his throat.

“Before any of the ideas you’ve in your heads come flying out, I didn’t do that. The only thing I’m guilty of is not lying to the girl. She asked if I was going to marry Charlene. I told her that I had to ask, and she had to say yes. That, and tying my shoe, is all I’ve gotten accomplished since the separation.” Ken stated, as he came around to where the adults were gathered.

Dropping to one knee in front of Charlene, he sat her on the other one. “You should know that this is not the when, where or how I was going to do this; I wanted to wait until your birthday. Seeing that it’s already such in Rotterdam, and points east—would you do me the honor of considering taking the poor broken wretch here in front of you, as your husband?”

Char closed her eyes, holding her hands to her chest like she was praying for guidance. The stillness descended again; everyone held their breaths. Her eyes opened and looked deeply into his. Then they blazed as she threw her arms around his neck. “You are a silly, lovely, foolishly perfect, exasperating man! What took you so long? Yes! Yes! 10,000 times, Yes!” she cried, as her lips melted onto his. They didn’t hear all the bedlam: the sighs, the congratulations, the cheering from the kids. It wasn’t until Jim and Tony lifted them up that they broke for air.

“Congrats, Bro. You did it now.” Tony snickered.

“What?”

“Made her year, and pissed off every trucker in the southwest. As long as you keep her happy, you’re safe.” Jim chuckled.

“That will be my new vocation, keeping her happy and safe for the rest of her life.” Ken responded.

“Why are you crying, Darlin’?”

“Because I’m so happy.” she smiled and hugged him tight.

Ken said a silent prayer of thanks, and held her tight. “I am too, Buttercup.”

The Dinosaur

Danielle Rabine

Poem

HONORABLE MENTION

Its breath evaporated right out of its bones

Silencing its roar for millions of years.

Still and stern as a soldier

Stripped down to pure honesty

After countless battles,

After blood.

Its stomach hollow as a dusty drum,

Its empty carcass echoing

From ages sans sustenance.

At the museum,

Children gape at the monster

Fortunate for its death,

For the absence of skin,

And muscles,

And anger.

Three Gushes & One Quiver

Derek Russel

Poem

HONORABLE MENTION

It was my sleepy voice
of sea and people,
the worn out hands of the dog,
the impassive eye still weeping of veins
and old men dying,
the flutter between rower and cricket,
and the murmur of thousand year old mouths.

I want to create
a dense and bitter poetry,
of slime and moss and animals urinating.
To create anomalies only the perfect drifter
would have knowledge of.
To establish the seahorse,
to strike the bell, to envision the dance,
to stride, to float as brilliantly as you,
Federico.

*Federico Garcia Lorica (1898-1936)

Coming Into a More Awakened State of Consciousness...

Kristie Lynch

Short Story

HONORABLE MENTION

Sherilyn couldn't believe what she was seeing; it couldn't be right. In shock and utter disbelief she tore open another box, cut open the package, and sat back down. Trying not to get her trembling hand wet, she once again peed on the plastic stick that so far was determined to ruin her life. What a predicament! One test could be a mistake. The second was possibly a faulty brand. But on the third try with another brand, with yet another plus sign quickly appearing before the minimum one minute was up, she had to face the fact that she was... definitely... PREGNANT.

She startled herself as she started laughing uncontrollably. By all rights, she should be crying. She tried to stifle the giggles with her hands as she tried to figure out why she was acting like a nervous immature teenager when she was, up until a half hour ago, a confident, successful, mature, business woman and recent "empty nester." Trying to figure out what had come over her, she immediately registered what the problem was... she WAS PREGNANT! She began to recall, as if it were only yesterday, the emotional roller coaster she always experienced when she was in the first trimester of her previous pregnancies. "Shit! This could not be happening!"

At 46, she was not prepared for such news nor could she see how she could ever prepare for such a thing at this time in her life. "This doesn't happen to mature adults who use birth control," she ruminated. She had already gone through an unexpected pregnancy years ago and it changed the course of her life drastically. "This can't be happening.... Not again!"

"Holy Shit!" "What am I going to do?" she thought to herself. "There is no way I can have another baby." "What is Jack going to say... the girls... my boss?" "I'm too old for this." "I do not want another baby!" So many thoughts were swirling around in her brain that her head began throbbing.

"Honey, I'm home," Sherilyn heard Jack yell at the same time she heard the door shut.

"Shit," she whispered as she hurriedly threw the three plastic sticks into the pink seashell wastebasket.

She hurriedly scrunched up the accompanying boxes in an attempt to hide the advertisement of the previous contents and wadded up a bunch of tissues to place on top as further camouflage. As she quickly washed her hands, she yelled through the half open door, "I'll be out in a minute." After straightening her hair, wiping off a slight smear under her eye, and taking just a millisecond to take deep breath in and quickly letting it out, she went to greet her husband.

"How was your day, Sweetheart?" she asked as she planted a kiss on his cheek.

"Not too bad, but I'm exhausted," he replied with a return kiss, as he gathered his wife in his arms for a hug. "I'm gonna grab a beer and try and catch the last half of the game, if you don't mind."

"Go ahead, I just got home and haven't even started dinner yet," she replied as they both headed toward the kitchen.

"Thought George was going to start letting you get out early on Wednesdays?" Jack inquired.

Not wanting to explain that she did get home early and what she had been doing, she lied. "Wanda needed my help with her project so I stayed and helped her a bit. I'm going to make spaghetti, so dinner won't be long."

She handed Jack a beer and shoed him out of the kitchen with a quick pat on his butt that was followed by his usual retort, "You keep that up and I'm going to throw you down and take you right here on the kitchen floor."

Sherilyn turned her head and rolled her eyes as Jack hadn't "taken her right here" since before the kids were born, so she wasn't too worried about his threat. Even when they became "empty nesters" when Jaclyn moved out last summer, Jack's threats still never materialized; not due to lack of want on her part, but due to Jack's back troubles that would leave him permanent fixture on the kitchen floor if things got too wild.

Watching her "all talk, no action" husband head to his chair with his beer, and momentarily putting all thoughts out of her head, she began dinner as she pulled out the necessary pots, pans, and ingredients.

She was hoping that the mundane task of preparing and cooking dinner would take away her worries for a moment, but it was to no avail.

Staring into the spaghetti water as it started to boil brought back memories of the obligatory sterilization of thousands of baby bottles years ago. The pureed state of the tomato sauce, which was the exact consistency of the homemade baby food she remembered spending hours preparing for her babies, caused the flood of tears she had been trying to curtail. Her emotions, welling up due to her predicament and pregnancy hormones, had her sinking to the floor as all energy was suddenly drained out of her. Her sobs, becoming louder and uncontrollable, had Jack running into the kitchen in fear for his wife. Seeing the water bubbling over onto the stove, he turned off the burners before getting down on the floor next to his wife.

"What's wrong?" Jack asked, as he quickly scanned his wife's limbs for cuts, burns, or injury. Seeing no blood or immediate injury, he cradled his wife in his arms, waiting for the sobs to subside so he could get some kind of explanation to his wife's break down.

Feeling foolish and not having the time or energy to come up with a lie to explain her bizarre and unsettling behavior, she gasped out the words she herself did not want to hear again, "I'm pregnant!"

Hearing the words being spoken aloud sent her into another fit of uncontrollable sobs. She buried her head in her husband's lap to hide her distress and embarrassment. Being pregnant at her age would send the whole family into a tizzy, and even though it was an accident she felt like she was the one to blame. What had she done wrong? She had used birth control successfully for years. She wasn't an irresponsible teenager. "Why? Why her? Why now?"

What was Jack going to say? He had been talking about how they could travel and have time to themselves again now that the kids were out of the house. How would he feel having a child graduate high school when he was 69 years old? She was afraid to look at her husband's face. She couldn't bear to see the anger and disappointment in his face... but she couldn't keep her head buried in her husband's lap forever.

As she lifted her head, wiping the tears from her eyes so she could see clearly again, she was flabbergasted by the look she witnessed on Jack's face. Instead of the anger, disappointment, or bewilderment she had expected him to exhibit, she was greeted with the biggest, stupidest, silliest smile she had ever seen Jack have. Her anxious tears immediately turned to anger. She wanted to smack

Jack across the face for exhibiting such happiness when she was so devastated. She turned her eyes away from Jack's exaltation in an attempt to stop the vomit that was quickly working its way up to her throat. She was surprised by the surge of anger and disgust she felt toward her husband at this moment that she could only attribute it to... pregnancy hormones!

"Honey?" "Sweetheart?" Jack said softly. Sherilyn wouldn't look at him. "Sherilyn!" Jack said abruptly enough that she turned her head towards him. "You had me so scared," Jack started, "I thought something was really wrong. Being pregnant isn't the worst thing to happen. I thought you had hurt yourself; you scared me!"

At that Sherilyn got up off the floor and turning toward her non-frazzled husband spat out nasty-fat-scared-pregnant-demeaning words:

"It's your fault! From the moment Jaclyn moved out of the house you've been all over me. I started falling "asleep" on the couch... not because of extra projects at work, but because I can't take you crawling over me every night when I'm so exhausted from work... and as soon as Jaclyn moved out, I wasn't even safe on the couch. And apparently no amount of birth control can curtail a continual, onslaught of sperm day after day. You did this to me! This is your fault!"

Jack, having lived through Sherilyn's pregnancy tirades three times before, thought he knew what to expect and didn't take her seriously thinking she would eventually settle down and become sensible once she got used to the idea. "Come on, Honey. This could be the boy we've always wanted. You should be excited."

"How dare you tell me what I want and what I feel! I've given up everything for years while you've gotten everything you've wanted." *I do not want another child!* And I'm not having another child! I'm not! It's my time. What about me?"

As he would normally do during any kind of disagreement, Jack grabbed a glass and a bottle of whiskey out of the cupboard and poured a drink. Not knowing enough to just keep quiet and just let his wife vent, Jack shouted, "It's *my* baby *too*! And you are not going to get rid of *my* child!" "If you try to get rid of *my* baby, we're through!" he growled as he snatched up the whiskey bottle and his glass, and quickly withdrew to the living room.

"Fuck you! It's *my* body and I'm going to do what I damn well please with *my* body! And you can't stop me!" Sherilyn screamed at his retreating figure.

Sherilyn felt like she couldn't breathe. Life was not fair and Jack was not being fair. She had to get

away. She stormed out the back door, got in her car and started driving. Realizing she did not know what she was going to accomplish by fleeing or where she should go, she started to cry. She pulled into the parking lot of the neighborhood park because it was the closest place to pull over since she could barely see through the stream of tears that were flowing. As the tears started to subside, she began fumbling in her purse trying to feel for her cell phone that had settled at the bottom of her purse. She had decided to call Wanda. Wanda would listen and not criticize or tell her what to do. That is why they got along so well at work together. Wanda would help her make sense of all this.

"Wanda, you don't understand," Sherilyn whined. "He was so fucking happy. I don't know what to do now. I had figured he would feel the same as me and realize we're just too damn old to be having kids. I figured we'd both cry but then realize it was for the best. Oh, Wanda, What am I going to do? I don't want another kid!"

"Oh boy, you do have a situation don't you? Where are you at right now?" Wanda inquired.

"I was so upset I just was driving around but I had to pull over at Optimist Park because I started crying so hard I couldn't see to drive."

Wanda listened to Sherilyn ramble on. When Sherilyn finally seemed calm enough and had finished ranting, Wanda was finally able to give her input: "The only way you will resolve this is for you to go back home and talk it out with Jack. I have my opinion, but it won't help you decide what to do. This is a situation that Jack and you have to deal with... so get yourself together and get back home. I know Jack and he must be worried sick. I love you girl; I'm with you no matter what you decide," Wanda said with empathetic conviction.

"Yeah, you're right. I'll call you tomorrow and fill you in. Love you too," Sherilyn replied as she quickly snapped her phone shut to make sure she didn't waiver on ending the call... or her decision to go home.

"Jack must be worried. Wanda is right; Jack and I have to deal with this together." She pulled the visor down to look in the mirror to see how scary and hideous she must look. She knew, even before looking, that black mascara covered her face.

While wiping the mascara streaks off her face with a crumbled napkin she found in the glove box, Sherilyn's complete self-absorption disappeared as she suddenly heard the sound of excited shouting in the park. Looking toward the source of the noise, she witnessed a flock of children running around the park. Not realizing it, she began to exhibit a slight smirk on

her previously distressed face as she watched a little girl go down a slide. She observed the little girl fall on her knees when she reached the bottom and with not so much as a whimper, brushed the dirt from her knees and climbed right back up the ladder again. Her long red hair in pig tails and fierce determination reminded her of Jaclyn when she was a little girl. At that moment, Sherilyn's head became flooded with the fond memories she had of her girls as babies—then children—then the young adults they were now. "Boy, it sure went fast... they grew up quick."

As Sherilyn watched the children play she became so melancholy that she began to think having another baby might not be so bad after all. She did miss having the children at home. They were finally financially stable enough to not have to worry about money. Ian, her boss, would just have to get used to the idea. She was beginning to feel confident she could handle her job and a new baby.

Sherilyn was deciding which room to redecorate for the new baby when she finally felt calm enough to drive home. Since Ivy's old room was closest to the master bedroom, she began to plan the renovation of the purple walls and black ceiling of Ivy's adolescence to a softer pastel green or yellow for the new baby. With a new found peace, she turned the key, put the car in drive and headed for home. She couldn't wait to get home to tell Jack the news and witness this time with shared excitement, *the biggest, stupidest, silliest smile* she had ever seen on Jack's face.

"Sherilyn! Sherilyn! Wake up!" Sherilyn heard a voice shouting. The voice sounded like Jack's. She struggled a moment to open her eyes, but she felt so tired. She could see a face that looked like Jack's, but her vision remained blurry through her watery, half-opened eyes.

"Jack, Honey," she said in a whisper as she reached up to touch his cheek to verify it was her husband. "I've changed my mind; we're going to have the baby."

Not hearing the affirmation or the words of excitement she had expected, she finally forced her eyes to fully open hoping her apprehension and confusion would disappear as she observed once more *the biggest, stupidest, silliest smile* she had ever seen from Jack because of the reversal of her earlier announcement. Jack would kiss her and convince her everything would be alright... only... as her eyes began to focus... she saw Jack's mouth was far from smiling...it was twisted in a grimace. Becoming panicked, Sherilyn tried to get up, but Jack, gently but firmly, restrained her by holding her shoulders down.

"Sherilyn! Stop! Don't try to move yet," Jack insisted.

Sherilyn groggily was still trying to piece it all together. The last thing she remembered was driving home to tell Jack the good news. So how did Jack get here so fast? He hadn't been in the car with her? Or was he? What was going on?

"Jack, what happened?" she asked in a daze. "Are you alright?" she queried, barely above a whisper. Hearing the weakness and distress in her own voice she began to realize the pain and injuries she had. Jack wasn't helping her confusion as he continued to hold her down, not answering her questions. He just kept repeating the same words over and over:

"Sherrie... Sweetie... Don't move! Oh my God! I was so worried... Baby... Sweetie... I just wanted to find you, tell you... please stay still... I would never leave you... I love you."

The paramedics, rushing over, shouted at Jack to get out of the way. With practiced precision they delicately but quickly, put a brace around her neck, guided her onto a back board, hooked up an IV and gently set her on a gurney. Sherilyn, scared and confused, wanted Jack back by her side. He always made her feel safe. She needed him to tell her what happened.

"Jack! Jack! Where are you?" Sherilyn whimpered, as the gurney she was now strapped to was being directed toward the awaiting ambulance.

Not being able to move her head or see her surroundings due to her stabilization, as the emergency workers lifted her into the ambulance, she finally glimpsed, out of the corner of her eye, with an ever-increasing horror, an officer putting hand cuffs on her husband as he stumbled about in front of his prized '63 split-back cherry red Corvette. The sports coupe, her husband absolutely, positively, without a doubt could not live without... was now crumpled, smoking and embedded in the driver's side of her Mercury station wagon.

"Jack. Oh my God. Jack," she gasped in disbelief.

With increasing clarity, dismay, and horror, finally coming into a more awakened state of consciousness as the pain became more intense, she quickly realized, as she felt blood rushing between her legs, that they no longer had a decision to make... her husband... had made it for them.

Star Trek, threesomes, and curling

Chelsea Manning

Poem

HONORABLE MENTION

Star Trek, threesomes, and curling.

It's only weird if

you're not into it.



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